



CAPTivations

Success Stories in Prevention

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Community Awareness Team (KS)

In the Community Awareness Team substance abuse program at Colby, KS, youth are not only the target audience, they are the ones that dream up many of the ideas and make them happen.

"These kids know what youth empowerment is and enjoy the ability to have a say in what goes on in a group like this," said Janet Worthy, Community Awareness Team's project director.

Shanda Draper couldn't agree more. Now a senior at Colby High School, she has been involved with the team since she was a freshman; and she can't begin to list the many projects and programs she's participated in to teach her peers and younger kids about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

"The adults help us out a lot," Sandra said, "but the

students are the ones who see things first hand. That's really cool that the adults are really receptive to what we have to say."

The origins of the Community Awareness team came from a 1995 county health assessment survey which was hand delivered to the residents of Colby, a small farming community in northwest Kansas. The survey was mailed to the rural residents of Thomas County. Emily Strange, BSN, now the Colby School District nurse, worked for the county at the time, notes that the county got a 40 percent return rate.

The survey asked county residents what they considered were the most pressing overall health needs. The top three priorities turned out to be cardiovascular illnesses, cancer and unintentional injuries. The group which met to work on the survey decided that if they focus on substance abuse, Strange said, they could hit all three of those areas.

For three years, until Sept. 30, 2001, the Community Awareness Team had funding from the Kansas State Incentive Cooperative Agreement, which it used on a wide range of projects to get its name out and to "decrease the use of alcohol, tobacco

and other drugs by promoting healthy, responsible and legal choices."

Now, the team gets funding from a local law enforcement trust fund set up from a drug bust two years ago, from the county attorney, and from the city. The team also received funds from the Kansas Smokeless Kids Initiative for tobacco education. Its new mission statement calls for promoting "mutual and self respect."

One of the most enduring of the team's programs has been its cross-age teaching project, in which the high school volunteers go to the middle school and teach middle school students about substance abuse prevention. For the Great American Smokeout, Nov. 15, 2001, the high school

students taught the middle schoolers about the effects of environmental smoke and helped them write letters to local businesses, either commending them for their smoke-free policies, or asking them to implement smoke-free policies if they didn't have

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them in place.

The local bowling alley received a slew of letters from the middle school students, who often hang out there, Worthy said. The bowling alley allows smokers and didn't want to lose business by changing its policy, but didn't want to lose the kids, either. The bowling alley management did post the letters on its bulletin board, Worthy said.

Another popular program is "Question of the Week," in which students come up with questions related to substance abuse and the answer is revealed in some format. Originally, the questions were written up on posters, which the teachers hung in their rooms on Monday, giving the students a chance to think about the question. Then on Friday, the teachers could flip the poster over to reveal the answer.

Now, the question



and the answer are presented during a five to 10 minute spot on the radio on Monday morning during the school year and as part of the high school news program. Worthy stated that example questions include, "How long does it take to become an alcoholic?" and "What is the drug 'Special K'?" The topics, though, have broadened in scope to include such issues as tattoos and body piercings and date rape.

The Community Awareness Team also was able to get a peer listening group started at the high school. Dubbed Supporting Our Students (SOS), the program is for students who come to the school counselor with a problem, whether it's a situation at home such as an alcoholic parent, or a homework-related issue. The counselor puts the students in touch with peers who are in the SOS program, and the peers meet with the students on a regular basis to talk with them about their problems. The peer listeners get training to know when to refer the students to other forms of help and to keep what they hear in strict confidence.

The team supported the original group of teens who wanted to start the peer listening group by helping them present the idea to officials in the school district. The youth had to sell the concept first to the counselor, then the principal, then the superintendent, and finally to the school board before it became an official school program. Once the board approved the idea, the Community Awareness Team sent two high school counselors to a retreat training program in Colorado.

Counselors and peer listeners now have their own retreats, plus training sessions in Hays, KS, and Colorado, to learn about confidentiality issues and other skills needed to be effective peer listeners.

The school district has been very supportive of the Community Awareness Team, Worthy said. School officials have been receptive to letting students out of school to do cross-age teaching or to attend drug abuse prevention conferences across the state or across the country. The school district, Worthy said, has even let the team use its Suburbans to take kids to conferences and other activities.

"The school recognizes the work these kids do as important and educational," Worthy said.

Perhaps the wildest success has

come from the introduction of Mr. Burnout. Mr. Burnout was a giant cigarette—actually a woman in a cigarette costume who dared to show up at the Millennium Smokeout Bonfire on Kick Butts Day 2000, April 4. To let the kids know Mr. Burnout was on the loose prior to the bonfire, posters were put up in the Colby schools, saying he was wanted for influencing children in a bad way. On the day of the bonfire, Mr. Burnout showed up in the elementary school gym, but despite Worthy and the high school kids' best efforts, he hid behind students and teachers, dodging and evading them, and he "got away."

"The grade school kids really got into it," Worthy enthused.

Mr. Burnout's luck ran out when he showed up at the bonfire, though. The police came, sirens wailing, and chased Mr. Burnout down. The giant cigarette was arrested and sent to jail, and pictures of the arrest and his mug shot ran in the local

newspaper.

Looking back at how much fun that experience was, Worthy said with a smile, "We need to get him out again."

And in January, Worthy announced that Mr. Burnout will be dancing with the high school drill team. If, that is, he has enough breath to keep up.

The Community Awareness Team has used the Kansas Communities that Care Survey at Colby High School to measure its success. So far, the survey results are showing successes in kids staying away from alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The percentage of high school students reporting not having had five or more drinks in a row in the previous two weeks rose from 64% in 1995 to 85.4% in 2000. The percentage of students reporting non-use of alcohol in the past 30 days rose from 41 percent in 1995 to 65% in 2000. The percentage of students who reported smoking cigarettes in the past 30 days from 30% in 1995 to 11.6% in 2000; and the percentage of students who reported using smokeless tobacco in the past 30 days dropped from 24% in 1995 to 5.4% in 2000.

Draper, who graduates from Colby High School this spring, plans to go to Colby Community College for a year before transferring to a four-year school.

"I've learned to work with other people," she said. "It's helped me, with all the teaching I've done."

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Resources:

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
www.samhsa.gov/centers/csap/csap.html

Decision Support System
www.preventiondss.org

Join Together
www.jointogether.org

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America
www.cadca.org

"For this community success story and others from across the Southwest region, visit our website at <http://www.swcapt.org/products/success.html>